

New Roads School Advanced Seminar:
The Biocultural Bases of Love, Compassion and Morality

Fall and Spring Semesters, 2005-06

Instructor: Jim Hahn

Syllabus

Course Description and Objectives:

Scholars distinguish two approaches to explanation in the social sciences. In particularistic or idiopathic explanation, the social scientist seeks a fulsome description of individual cultural practices and ideas. This “thick” approach is often contrasted with nomothetic explanation, which attempts to account for a broad cultural and historical range of behavior through simple and (ideally) elegant theorizing. In our own attempt to understand the phenomena of love, compassion, and morality, we will attempt what E.O. Wilson called a “consilience.” We will seek an understanding that is sensitive to the richness of the cultural conceptions of these phenomena. At the same time, we will allow ourselves the luxury of painting with the broad brush of the theoretician, posing exciting questions about why these phenomena came about, and why they appear in similar guises across both societies and time.

The first part of the course will be devoted to particularistic issues. We will investigate the concepts of love, compassion, and morality in differing social traditions. This anthropological approach will provide us with a broad and inclusive understanding of each concept, and will give us a sense of the cultural-bound nature of our own ideas. Some questions that might arise are: Is romantic love a human universal? Are “kindness” and “caring” defined similarly in all cultures? Are moral codes based on certain universal human values, or are they shaped primarily by local cultural belief? To what extent do different religious traditions agree about these ideas and their realization in day-to-day behavior?

In the second phase of our studies, we will shift our focus to the “why” questions, remaining mindful of the richness and depth of individual traditions. Why do concepts of love, compassion and morality appear in similar forms in broadly differing societies? Does monogamy have a biological basis, or does it serve as an example of culture’s ability to shape behavior in defiance of biological imperatives (for one or both sexes)? In light of the intense competition to survive and reproduce, why should animals – and humans in particular – *ever* feel compassion, pity, guilt or grief? Is true altruism possible?

Finally, in the third part of the course – corresponding roughly to the second semester – students try their hand at the craft of the social scientist, generating and testing their own hypotheses using their peers as informants and research subjects. The course will culminate with the writing of a formal research paper, to be published in our academic journal, *Aporia*.

Course Calendar

Week(s) of	Topics	Readings
September 5 – October 31	The Relativity of Love, Compassion and Morality	Reader of Anthropological Sources Stevenson: Chapters 1-4 (Introduction, Confucianism, Upanishadic Hinduism, The Bible) Sternberg: Chapters 1-3, 10- 12.
November 7 – February 13	The Universality of Love, Compassion, and Morality (First Semester Portfolio Paper Due Monday, January 16)	Hobbes & Rousseau excerpts Dawkins: Chapters 1-7, 10, 13 DeWaal excerpt Brown excerpts Sternberg: Chapters 4, 5, 9, 16. Stevenson: Chapters 6-8 (Kant, Marx, Freud) Fisher (entire book) Wright (entire book)
February 20 – March 13	Research Methods	Lord excerpts Agar excerpts
March 20 – April 24	Work on Individual Research Projects (First Semester Portfolio Paper Due Friday, April 28)	-----
April 31 – June 12	Create and Publish Academic Journal. Make presentations to faculty, social science classes.	-----

Methodology:

Students will meet in small weekly seminars to discuss readings, share written work, and address topics for focused discussion. Three to five formal debates will be held each semester. These will provide the opportunity for formation and development of original intellectual positions on topics relevant to the course.

Written work will consist of: 1) weekly reading and reflection papers on topics assigned by the instructor, 2) a biweekly journal in which students will propose hypotheses about human behavior and test them against informal, day-to-day observations, and 3) a major portfolio paper at the end of each semester (see below).

Assignments / Grading:

Weekly reading/reflection papers (15%).

Biweekly journal entries (15%).

Weekly seminar presentations (25%).

Project proposal (10%).

Portfolio Projects (35%):

First Semester: Library research paper on topic of student's choice.

Second Semester: Formal paper based on individual research project, to be published in academic journal.

Course Bibliography:

Texts:

Dawkins, Richard. *The Selfish Gene* (2nd ed.), Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989.

Fisher, Helen. *Why We Love: The Nature and Chemistry of Romantic Love*, New York: Henry Holt, 2004.

Sternberg, Robert J., and Michael L. Barnes (eds.). *The Psychology of Love*, New Haven: Yale, 1988.

Stevenson, Leslie F., and David L. Haberman (eds.). *Ten Theories of Human Nature* (3rd ed.), Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998.

Wright, Robert. *The Moral Animal*, New York: Vintage, 1994.

Articles/Excerpts:

Reader of Anthropological Sources on Love, Compassion, Moral Relativism/Absolutism

Excerpts from Hobbes, *Leviathan*.

Excerpts from Rousseau, *The Social Contract*.

Excerpt from DeWaal, Franz, *Chimpanzee Politics*.

Excerpts from Brown, Donald. *Human Universals*.

Excerpts from Lord, Charles G., *Social Psychology*.

Excerpts from Agar, Michael H. *The Professional Stranger: An Informal Introduction to Ethnography*